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DEVELOPING A JUNIOR COLLEGE READING TEST.

BY- KURAK, ALEX
MINNESOTA UNIV., MINNEAPOLIS

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A REVIEW OF THE AVAILABLE LITERATURE INDICATED A NEED TO BROADEN THE TRADITIONAL CONCEPTION OF COMPREHENSION AND TO EXTEND THE USUAL RANGE OF READING SKILLS IN A READING TEST WITH FOUR MAJOR DIVISIONS--(1) RATE IS A TEST OF THE READER'S READING SPEED, (2) VOCABULARY ITEMS TEST HIS RECOGNITION OF WORDS, TERMS, AND IDIOMS, AS WELL AS HIS ABILITY TO INFER MEANINGS FROM THE CONTEXT, (3) COMPREHENSION SECTIONS TEST ABILITY TO RECOGNIZE THE STRUCTURE OF WRITTEN MATERIAL, TO ABSORB SPECIFIC AND GENERAL CONTENT, AND TO RESPOND TO THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE VARIOUS ELEMENTS OF WRITTEN MATERIAL. A SET OF READINGS AND EXERCISES WAS ALSO DEVELOPED. WHEN THE ORIGINAL TEST WAS FOUND TO BE TOO RESTRICTED IN SCOPE OF MATERIAL, ANOTHER FORM WAS PREPARED TO PERMIT A MORE ADEQUATE TESTING OF GENERAL READING ABILITY. IN 1967 THE "JUNIOR COLLEGE READING TEST (FORM B, REVISED)" WAS BEING ADMINISTERED EXTENSIVELY AS A PART OF THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA EXPERIMENTAL GENERAL COLLEGE COMPREHENSIVE TESTING PROGRAM. THIS ARTICLE IS PUBLISHED IN "THE GENERAL EDUCATION SOUNDING BOARD," VOLUME 4, NUMBER 1, SPRING 1967, PUBLISHED BY THE UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA. (WO)

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Alex Kurak

Like many other projects, ours had a definite goal, but we had only vague notions of how to proceed toward it. We knew that we wanted to construct an entirely new reading test for our particular student population. This purpose was motivated by our conviction that all of the reading tests with which we were familiar were, in one way or another, inadequate for General College students -- and possibly for all junior college students. Though we had felt this for several years, we had continued to use the existing reading tests in GC 30A, Reading and Vocabulary Development, because they are nationally recognized, and, mainly, because they were available. By the fall of 1963, we felt that the time had come to begin the process of building our own test, with the aim of eventually validating it for our junior college population.

Since we were a little vague about the techniques of test construction, we began by consulting books and articles on the subject of reading and testing. As anyone who has looked into the subject knows, the literature on reading is voluminous: the bulk of it consists of data on the applications of various techniques to the problem of increasing reading skills; much of it deals with the methods of teaching reading in the grade schools (and the resulting controversies over the efficacy of the various approaches); and a little of it is concerned with the fundamental question of what reading <u>is</u>, and the implications of <u>that</u> for the teaching of reading. The latter point has interested such specialists as linguists, psychologists, psychiatrists, psychoanalysts, and neurologists, as well as, of course, professional educators of every kind. Everybody, it seemed, was talking about reading, and a lot of people were intent on doing something about it. The bulk of the materials on reading, however, consists of reports by those who conduct studies <u>a priori</u>; that is, studies based on certain assumptions about reading that themselves have not been examined. There is, for instance, the widely held assumption that the way to improve reading ability is to concentrate on eliminating certain undesirable physiological habits of the reader and to substitute other, more desirable, traits.

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Further, there is a widespread acceptance of, and consequent emphasis on, the desirability of increasing reading speed as the basis of improving reading efficiency. It was about some of these fundamental assumptions that we were most uneasy. Particularly we were concerned with what seemed, in the studies we looked over, to be undue restrictions on the way reading comprehension was viewed. Among the various commentators on the subject, we found no concensus about what was essential to reading comprehension or about how it could be analyzed. In our own minds, there gradually began to evolve a conception of reading as an integrated, organic process, and it was the implications of this conception that we began to explore. The immediate result of our speculations in the theory of reading was a rather vague, rambling "policy paper" which presented some background for a series of "measurable outcomes" of the reading process.[1]

Once we had verbalized a rationale, the next task was translating policy into something specific and usable. In an effort to determine what elements of the reading process--or what reading skills--authorities consider important, we made an item-by-item analysis of the reading tests that we had customarily used in our reading and vocabulary course. From this examination we concluded that, though most reading tests do indeed discriminate between a reader's "receptive ability" and his "reflective ability," there were large areas that we considered crucial to our conception of <u>comprehension</u> that were either not identifiable in existing tests or not tested at all. In other words, we felt that the usual testing techniques failed by not testing areas of comprehension that we felt were at least as important as recall of facts, recognition of vocabulary, and inference from facts. Not that these elements of comprehension are insignificant; it is rather that they presuppose some abilities and skills that, in our judgment, also ought to be tested for. We

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[1]Copies of this policy paper, "Rationale for a Reading Project," may be obtained from the editors.

felt that, in order to construct a useful instrument to test a reader's comprehension, we needed to widen the traditional conception of comprehension, to isolate and elaborate the elements that go into comprehension, and, especially, to point out that, beneath the level of facts and inferences, a reader responds to written materials in a complex manner involving many interrelated skills and abilities. Only by elaborating a wider range of reading skills, we felt, could we proceed in the construction of an adequate reading test.

Our next task, after the conceptualizing described above, was to devise a list of skills that, in our view, were essential to the reading process. This list was to differ from the one in the earlier "Rationale for a Reading Project" in that, whereas that one was theoretical and hypothetical, this one was to be practical, concrete, and, especially, "implementable." We wanted the skills and abilities in the reading process isolated and defined in practical terms, so that we could manufacture individual test items that could refer to specific, individual reading skills. We wanted, in other words, a one-to-one relationship between specific reading skills and specific test items, so that we could test all of the elements of the reading process in so far as we could identify them. Our deliberations in this part of the project resulted in a concrete statement which, if dogmatic, was at least an outline that could be used to implement our plan of measuring reading skills. Though our analysis of reading skills has similarities to others, we felt that in the area of testing reading comprehension we had added dimensions that were not recognized in other reading tests. The full plan for our reading test follows.

OUTLINE OF JUNIOR COLLEGE READING TEST

1. Rate (to test the reader's reading speed)

2. Vocabulary (to test the reader's recognition of words, terms, and idioms, as well as his ability to infer the meanings of words, terms, and idioms from the context)

a. Denotative meaning in context (to test the reader's understanding of the literal meanings of words, terms, and idioms)
b. Connotative meaning in context (to test the reader's understanding of the suggested or implied meanings of words, terms, and idioms)

3. Comprehension (to test the reader's ability to recognize the structure of written material; to absorb specific and general content; and to respond to the implications of the various elements of written material)
   a. Structure (to test the reader's recognition and awareness of the organization of a written selection)
      (1) Multi-paragraph (to test the reader's recognition and awareness of the organization of multi-paragraph units)
      (2) Paragraph (to test the reader's recognition and awareness of the organization within a single paragraph)
   b. Understanding (to test the reader's ability to absorb specific and general content from a written selection)
      (1) Factual or specific information (to test the reader's ability to absorb specific facts and concrete information from the content of a written selection)
      (2) Generalized or abstract meanings (to test the reader's ability to absorb concepts and generalizations from the content of a written selection)
   c. Critical awareness (to test the reader's ability to respond to a reading selection from his own experience

and his own sensibilities)

(1) Of the writer's attitudes toward his subject (to test the reader's ability to recognize the writer's point of view toward a subject on the basis of the language of the selection)

(2) Of the implications of the selection (to test the reader's ability to recognize the writer's unexpressed or indirect meanings on the basis of the language of the selection)

(3) Of the effectiveness of the passage (to test the reader's ability to recognize the success and the value of a given piece of reading material)

From the general tenor of the preceding paragraphs, the disinterested reader could easily conclude that our project was being carried on in the thin air of high abstraction and remote possibilities. However, though we soared through the rarified atmosphere of theory, we were at the same time plodding along a parallel, if less exhilarating, orbit. That is to say, while we planned and looked forward to our ultimate goal of a reading test which, we hoped, would be more useful to us than existing tests, we were all the while compiling readings and exercises designed to try out some of the very elements of reading comprehension that we planned to incorporate into our test. This part of the project involved going through General College textbooks looking for sample expository readings to excerpt for purposes of compiling them into an anthology. Since our aim was to devise a test for the student body we were most familiar with, and since one aim of the General College course in Reading and Vocabulary Development is to improve our students' abilities to cope with the readings they are assigned in all of their courses, we felt that the textbooks actually used in General College courses ought to be the prime source of reading materials

for teaching and testing. Accordingly, we set several assistants to work at the task of reading textbooks, excerpting coherent, unified selections from them, and devising vocabulary and comprehension exercises based on the excerpted selections. The ultimate result of this effort--which lasted over six months--was two massive volumes, one an anthology of readings from General College textbooks (College-Level Readings for GC 30A), and the other a set of exercises based on the readings (Exercises for College-Level Readings [GC 30A]). Both of these volumes are now being used in our Reading and Vocabulary Development course. The experience of compiling an anthology of fifty reading selections, and of making up fifty sets of vocabulary and comprehension exercises, served us in good stead when the time came to choose items for our reading test. The final draft of the first form of the reading test, then, was the culminating result of the sifting through of a large mass of material from textbooks used in many of the courses of the General College curriculum.

Several administrations of Form A (the first form of the reading test) in the Reading and Vocabulary Development course convinced us that, though we were on the right track as far as some of our techniques were concerned, the nature of the reading material in the test was too restricted to permit an adequate testing of general reading ability. Accordingly, we laid plans for another form of the test, a form which would contain non-textbook readings and non-technical vocabulary. In a search for material, we perused journals, magazines, manuals, and other miscellaneous works, culling out self-contained excerpts that, in our judgment, had possibilities for testing reading skills of the kind delineated in our outline. In time we had our Form B and, like Form A, it was extensively tested in the classroom. On the basis of an item analysis, Form B was revised, although we were gratified to find that the item analysis did not indicate the need for extensive revision. Junior College Reading Test (Form B, Revised) is now in the process of being administered extensively as a part of the experimental General College comprehensive testing program. It will, no doubt, be analyzed further, and perhaps further revision of it will

b necessary. In any case, no sooner was our first revision of Form B completed than we began looking ahead to a Form C, a form which will differ in some respects from both Forms A and B, and which will take advantage of some of the lessons learned in building its predecessors. Our efforts in test construction, though often frustrating and perhaps overly idealistic, have resulted in at least one firm conviction: there is a real need for a valid reading test for the growing junior college population. Whether or not our test will fill that need, only time can tell.